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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the presumption that larger teacher education programs are superior to smaller ones, suggesting that many of the persistent problems of preservice teacher education are rooted in the large, bureaucrati organization so prevalent in current programming. The paper suggests that small program size makes possible the development and implementation of fruitful programming, since it is easier to conduct the sustained conversation needed to create a well-designed program. The paper begins by examining the complexities and contradictions that accompany large programs, which are typically staffed with a faculty representing a wide variety of specializations. This specialization can lead to segmented and fragmented programming. Next, the paper discusses the advantages of small faculties, including a broadened sense of responsibility, more ability to meet as a group, more ability to talk outside of formal meetings, and the ability to take advantage of vertical staffing. Finally, the paper examines how to achieve the advantages of smallness. Two suggested strategies are the multiple models strategy and the program-within-a-program strategy. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Bigger Isn't Always Better, and Small Can Be Very Beautiful

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While scholars and school reformers increasingly note the advantages of small elementary and secondary schools (Cushman, 1997; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Gregory & Smith, 1987; Meier, 1995; Monk, 1987; Sizer, 1996, 91-93, 97-100), teacher educators rarely even discuss the size of preservice programs. When size is addressed, small programs are routinely presumed to be weak. Some educators believe that small programs lack the specialized faculty needed to offer in-depth pedagogical instruction (Committee on Accreditation Alternatives, 1983; Tom, 1996). Others worry that small programs produce so few teachers that they have minimal impact on the overall supply of teachers. Why even tolerate small programs, particularly when the existence of such programs dilutes the modest personnel and fiscal resources devoted to the overall field of teacher education (Clark, 1984)?

In this paper, I make the case for examining the presumption that "bigger is better." Many of the persistent problems of preservice teacher education are rooted in the large and bureaucratic organization so prevalent in current programming. In particular, the segmentation and fragmentation characteristic of teacher education programming is a by-product of large-scale programs which are conducted by large and highly specialized faculties of education. Major impediments to restructuring and rethinking teacher education, I contend, inevitably accompany mass programming.

At the same time, small program size makes possible the

development and implementation of fruitful programming, since the sustained conversation needed to create a well-designed program is easier to conduct in a small as opposed to a large faculty. Conversation among faculty members is a prerequisite creating the programmatic attributes characteristic of a sound pedagogical curriculum: the development of an underlying conceptual framework, the focus on a limited number of ideas and practices, intellectual links across education courses, coordinated course and field work, among others. Discussions within a small faculty are not necessarily more sophisticated than comparable discussions in a large faculty, but the occasions for dialogue are easier to arrange when a faculty is small.

The advantages of smallness go beyond program planning issues. The conduct of programming is simpler with a small faculty, since it becomes possible for a faculty member to teach the same students more than once in the program. This arrangement both facilitates the integration of program content and increases opportunities for instructors to get to know students well.

With this overview of my case for the detrimental impact of large teacher education programs and the importance of small teacher education faculties, I turn first to the complexities and contradictions which accompany large programs. These programs are typically staffed with a faculty which represents a wide variety of specializations, a condition which leads to both

segmented and fragmented programming.

Academic Specialization: The Root Evil?

Little did I realize when I became a professor in the mid-1960s that one day I would have the nerve to identify academic specialization as a force for evil -- the Darth Vader of teacher education programming. After all, I entered the professoriate as a devoted social studies specialist who was interested only in secondary schooling. In the formative years of my professorial career, I worked with a dozen high school teachers in a staff development project in which they piloted "new" social studies materials in their classrooms (Tom, 1997). In preservice teacher education, I focused on teaching secondary social studies methods and supervising social studies students assigned to local junior and senior high schools. In addition, I regularly attended the National Council for the Social Studies, and directed by scholarly inquiries toward curriculum development and implementation issues in the social studies. Social studies was central to my professional life.

No single event caused me to question my commitment to -- even my preoccupation with -- social studies. However, I think my first doubts about exclusive emphasis on that field occurred as a by-product of supervising student teachers. After I worried less about doing the "right thing" as a supervisor and became more attuned to how my student teachers perceived their role and understood the tasks of teaching, I gradually became aware of how

little impact the pedagogical curriculum had on student teachers. If an issue of motivation occurred in a high school social studies class, my student teacher did not rummage around in her memory to retrieve an appropriate theory from an earlier educational psychology class. Neither did she necessarily appeal to ideas from my social studies methods when she designed teaching materials. Being a student teacher supervisor provided me with an automatic reality check about how my students viewed and processed the professional curriculum.

However, I came to see that the "problem" was much more complex than that student teachers tended not make productive use of the pedagogical content which they had learned in our campus-based courses. This content itself was fragmented; each course was a self-contained entity. When I became the "coordinator of clinical training" at my institution in the early 1970s, I assumed responsibility for the design of the entire set of education courses.

These courses, of course, exhibited no overall design but rather represented assorted arenas of specialized content, e.g., social foundations, science methods, or general methods. The natural outcome was a "program" which was segmented into 5-10 islands of content (with the number depending on whether secondary or elementary programming was at issue), and each island had its own resident specialist. The task of the coordinator of clinical training was to arrange these islands

into an archipelago. Therefore, I saw my task primarily in administrative terms; program development was an issue of organization and coordination.

This perception, of course, left me in a weak position to do anything more than cosmetic program development. The intellectual authority for content determination remained with the faculty member responsible for each one of the specialized courses. These faculty members were not inclined to share this authority because they reasoned they knew best how to teach their own fields.

In addition, very few faculty members had any desire to intrude on the intellectual turf of colleagues, since each person tended to have what I have come to call a "topic-centered" identity. One's identity can be rather easily gauged by the introduction one makes in an orientation meeting for new students. "I am a professor of literacy" or "I'm a social foundations person" are examples of topic centered identities. "I teach in the elementary program" reflects a broader sense of identity; "I am a teacher educator" is an even more open-ended view of professional identity (Tom, in press).

When most members of a teacher education faculty have topic-centered identities, little incentive exists for dialogue about the design of a program. What can one really learn from someone who comes from a differing area of expertise? And why should we talk if I am really in the best position to identify the most

appropriate content from my field? Under conditions when curricular authority is presumed to reside with the holder of specialized expertise, the best that can be hoped for is some modest level of coordination so that content overlap is mitigated and, with luck, a few ideas may be emphasized across courses.

At best, an archipelago might be created, but gaps remain among these islands. The possibility of searching dialogue about the conceptual framework of a program is close to nil when topic-centered identities are the norm within a teacher education faculty. Much more likely are strident attempts to prevent unqualified instructors from teaching content for which they supposedly do not have the proper training and background. Credentials, not conceptual frameworks, are the passion of faculties which revere specialization.

Faculty Size and Specialization

At one level, all professors of education believe in the value of specialized knowledge. The vast majority of these professors obtained their doctorates in colleges of education which emphasize specialized study for those intending to become teacher educators. These categories of study, moreover, are amazing similar from institution-to-institution. Programs of doctoral study are ordinarily available in such specializations as social foundations (with several disciplinary sub-specialties), educational psychology (with several sub-specialties), curriculum and instruction (with various subject

matter specialties), and special education (also with sub-specialties). Thus, most beginning teacher educators arrive at their first job with an identity considerably narrower than the overall field of teacher education.

The subsequent development of a teacher educator's identity depends heavily on what type of institution employs that person and how large faculty of education is. At a large college of education -- let's say over 50 faculty members -- the entry-level teacher educator is usually assigned a teaching load which corresponds with the focus of doctoral preparation. In this case, the new faculty member's commitment to a specialized area of doctoral study is reinforced by initial teaching responsibilities.

In addition, if the norms of the college of education require substantial publication to obtain tenure, then educational inquiry further bolsters a teacher educator's belief in the value of specialization, since the beginning teacher educator is likely to conduct inquiry in an established sub-field of education. Selecting a specialized line of inquiry is a prudent choice in that the key tenure recommendation originates with an assistant professor's immediate colleagues, who themselves are likely to have engaged in specialized scholarship.

Topic-centered identities, therefore, tend to be strongest for teacher educators who work in major research institutions, one of the reasons why the folk wisdom that research institutions

have the most fragmented teacher education programming is usually accurate. The faculties of research-oriented institutions often look down on teacher education and see their teaching in this field as institutional service, literally a necessary kind of evil. When external funding becomes available, course assignments in teacher education are the most likely targets for research "buyouts." Indeed, substantial portions of the work of teacher education in major research institutions in done by graduate students and adjuncts (Shaffer & Striedieck, 1999; Tom, 1997), and program development work in such institutions is rarely rewarded (Nolan, 1985).

Less commonly acknowledged is the widespread presence of narrow identities among teacher educators who work in large schools of education where teaching is the core value. These schools of education are typically located in institutions which once were normal schools with a strong tradition of teacher preparation. While such institutions still educate very large numbers of teachers, many of them have tried to escape their teachers' college history and move up the institutional status ladder by placing more and more emphasis on research. As a result, faculty members in state universities -- including professors of education -- increasing are pressed to inquiry into educational phenomenon and publish the results. For research topics, these professors of education naturally turn to the areas of specialization consistent with their doctoral study, a

development which reinforces their topic-centered identities.

In those state universities which still do not emphasize scholarly pursuits, another dynamic is at work to foster topic-centered identities. These large faculties of education are usually departmentalized by areas of specialization, and multiple sections of particular courses are typically needed to accommodate the large student enrollments. A teacher educator, therefore, is grouped administratively with other professors with a similar specialization, and that person often instructs several sections of the same teacher education course. As a result, both the administrative structure of a college of education and the substantive content of teaching tends to channel the thinking and ultimately the identity of a professor toward a particular specialization. An added factor which keeps the perspective of teacher educators focused on their specializations is the heavy teaching loads which are routine in state universities.

Similar heavy teaching loads are also prevalent in smaller institutions, both public and private. At liberal arts colleges and medium-sized private universities, however, a teacher educator is likely to teach a variety of courses, often two or more different courses in the same teacher education program plus the supervision of student teachers (Beyer, 1988; Cohn, Gellman, & Tom, 1987; Maher, 1991). With a teaching load that is distributed over several areas of specialization, teacher educators working in small institutions -- not all of which are

private -- have less reason to identify with a particular identity such as "math educator" or "educational psychologist." More natural is to think of oneself as an "elementary educator" or a "secondary educator" or even as a "teacher educator." Even in these institutions, however, pressures to publish are increasingly evident, placing new pressures of specialization on the faculties of liberal arts colleges (Burgess, 1990).

A more generalized identity is not inherently good, but a broadened identity does incline teacher educators to question the authority of specialized expertise. Or, stated more positively, the broader the identity of a teacher educator, the more likely that person is to assume responsibility for the design of the overall program. The tendency to assume responsibility for the total program is one of several strengths associated with small faculty size.

The Advantages of Small Faculties

"How do you get faculty committed to the total teacher education program and to the students who go through it?" This question by my colleague Roy Edelfelt (Tom, 1997, p. 238) embodies the importance of having individual faculty members assume responsibility for the entire program. Without this assumption of programmatic responsibility, each person on a teacher education faculty is tempted to be concerned about only her portion of a program. This fragmented view of accountability is precisely what happens when topic-centered

identities are the norm.

While I cannot conclusively "prove" that small faculties are key to the development a broadened sense of responsibility, I have personally witnessed a lowered sense of topic-centered identities in small faculties. My experience in support of this generalization includes frequent NCATE program reviews over the last 13 years and active participation in the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education throughout the 1980s, as well as being a member of one small teacher education faculty and two larger ones. I have found program-wide commitment to be inversely related to the size of a teacher education faculty, though the correlation is by no means perfect. Remember that my earlier analysis of the "evils" of specialization was based on my work in a small education faculty.

But what besides broadened identities can be so fruitful about program design and development work in small teacher education faculties? My most productive and searching dialogues on teacher education occurred while I worked during the mid-1980s in a program which had three core faculty members (Cohn, Gellman, & Tom, 1987). I did not realize it at the time, since I had not yet worked in large teacher education faculties, but these conversations were qualitatively different from the ones which I subsequently would have in the context of larger teacher education faculties.

When Marilyn Cohn, Vivian Gellman, and I talked teacher

education, we frequently got beneath surface planning issues and addressed underlying questions of programmatic rationale and structure. Part of the conceptual tenor of these discussions, no doubt, was related to propensities distinctive to the three of us. However, important to the ease with which these searching conversations occurred was the relative absence of turf concerns. None of us felt any particular desire to protect some area of content, again a condition related to the relative absence of specialized identities among many small teacher education faculties.

Another advantage of smallness in a teacher education faculty is so obvious that it is often ignored. Small faculties can find a time to meet more readily than can large faculties, as anyone knows who has tried to find a common meeting time for a program faculty of 15 or 20 members. Also key is how easily small faculties can talk outside the formal meeting structure; hallway meetings of 3-4 people often turn into a programmatic discussion. In a large faculty, such hallway consultations are held at the peril of excluding a major portion of the faculty. In these ways, the ability to sustain a conversation about teacher education programming becomes easier in small faculties as compared to large ones.

Once engaged in dialogue, the question of developing agreements and negotiating conceptual differences among 3 as opposed to 13 or 23 faculty members are radically different

processes. While there is no simple way to contrast small-group with large-group programmatic discussions, small group discussions tend to have: greater participation by each member, fewer points of view expressed, less complex interchanges among group members, and a stronger sense of community among group members. At the same time, potential disadvantages of discussions among small faculties include: the possibility that divergent points of view will not be represented in the group, the tendency to become comfortable with one another and not challenge each other's thinking, and the likelihood of dramatic shifts in program direction when a member or two of a small faculty is replaced (Tom, 1988).

The advantages of smallness in a teacher education faculty also extend to the conduct of a professional program. Since the members of a small faculty of education often teach in more than one component of a program, the staffing by small faculties often naturally takes advantage of the benefits of vertical staffing. By vertical staffing, I mean an arrangement in which a faculty member follows a student through a program, at least in part. A faculty member, for example, may teach a prospective high school social studies teacher in a social foundations course, again in the social studies methods class, and then supervise the student teaching experience. The typical pattern in a large faculty of education is for staffing to be horizonal, with a different set of faculty members responsible for each course/experience in a

program.

The advantage of vertical staffing is that the faculty both gets to know students better than in the case of horizontal staffing and is also better positioned to make links among components of a program. All too often, a faculty member working under horizontal staffing is unfamiliar with the content which the prospective teacher has learned earlier in a program. Under this condition, the faculty member has trouble making links to topics taught earlier in the program; all the pressure for drawing connections across courses and experiences is placed on the prospective teacher. Knowing prospective teachers is important to teaching them well -- an argument consistently made by Sizer (1996) for high school teaching -- and at least one preservice program, the Community of Teachers (Gregory, 1993), has literally all the courses and experiences in the program taught by a single faculty member.

Such broad teaching responsibility, of course, places substantial demands on the content knowledge of an education professor. Much like Sizer's recommendation that "teachers should perceive themselves as generalists first (teachers and scholars in general education) and specialists second (experts in one particular discipline)" (1996, p. 159), I believe the same order of priorities ought to hold true for teacher educators. Teacher educators who are generalists are better prepared to participate in vertical staffing, are more likely to believe that

they can learn from dialogue with their colleagues, are less inclined to be fixated on issues of intellectual turf, and are more likely to be able to overcome the topic-centered identities into which they were socialized by their own graduate studies.

Achieving the Advantages of Smallness

Does everyone have to move to a small institution or a small teacher education program in a large institution to achieve the advantages of small teacher education faculty? No, they do not. Neither must we close down all big teacher education programs, though once I did fancifully propose locating the university with the largest teacher education program in each state and then eliminating the programs at that institution (Tom, 1998).

We must be careful, however, not to confuse institutional size with faculty size. Certainly, there is a correlation between having a large institution and having large teacher education programs taught be large faculties. However, even when teacher education programs are large, the faculties who teach in such programs do not have to be large. At least two alternatives exist whereby program faculties in teacher education can be kept small.

One approach was the "multiple models" strategy pursued at Michigan State University in the 1980s (Barnes, 1987; Book, 1983). Four of these alternative teacher education programs were thematic: academic learning (academic emphasis), learning community (personal and social responsibility), heterogeneous

classrooms (pluralism and equity), and multiple perspectives (teacher decision making within the context of competing demands). In addition to these conceptually oriented programs, each of which enrolled a cohort of students and had a core faculty, a fifth or traditional program continued to serve the majority of students in teacher education at Michigan State.

This multiple models approach persisted at Michigan State University for less than 10 years, and few teacher education faculties are willing to entertain the idea of distinctive programs existing side-by-side (for an exception, see Peterson, Benson, Driscoll, Narode, Sherman, & Tama, 1995). Faculty members frequently oppose distinctive and parallel programs by asking that each section of a particular course be similar to other sections. Besides revealing a bias for thinking in terms of courses rather than programs, this opposition to variation also reveals a deep-seated acceptance of standardization the factory model of teacher preparation.

A second approach to developing small teacher education faculties within the context of large numbers of prospective teachers is a program-within-a-program strategy. The earlier-mentioned Community of Teachers (Gregory, 1993) is an alternative program which exists within secondary teacher education at Indiana University. Undergraduates elect to apply for the program, and are considered for open spaces in Community of Teachers cohorts. Over the years, I suspect that there have been

a great number of attempts to create a teacher education alternative program within a larger program, but few of these efforts have been documented in the teacher education literature.

When the program-within-a-program strategy is employed, conflict and discord often result. Sometimes this high level of discord reflects opposition by faculty members who are not part of the alternative program (Ayers, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), but discord can also arise among a small faculty who plans and develops an alternative program (Denst, 1979; Tom, 1988). Given the opportunity to create something new, a small teacher education faculty can generate radically different program ideas, ideas which are not necessarily internally consistent with one another.

In addition, both the program-within-a-program strategy and the multiple models approach are often portrayed as "boutique" efforts. Such a critique is based on the idea that a small program, whatever its emphasis, never prepares more than a fraction of the teachers we need. Therefore, the reasoning goes, if either a program-within-a-program or a multiple models approach entails maintaining a large-scale "traditional program," then we would be better off if we were to reform the traditional program and abandon any small-scale alternatives. This argument has merit, but a reasonable response is to expand the number of small innovative efforts, not to accept the bureaucratic constraints which accompany total reliance on large-scale

programming.

Reflections and Recommendations

Small teacher education faculties are not an end in themselves. Rather, establishing small program faculties tends to lessen particular barriers to reform which routinely accompany programming conducted by large teacher education faculties. The sheer size of large faculties makes dialogue about programming complex and makes even the arranging of programming meetings a complicated endeavor. Dialogue among a large program faculty often never gets beyond issues of intellectual turf and administrative coordination; at least in the case of a small faculty, the possibility of a more intimate and searching conversation exists. A small faculty also makes vertical staffing possible, sometimes even necessary. Moreover, the generalist perspective, entailed by vertical staffing, both fosters positive teacher-student relationships and facilitates the making of links among the elements of pedagogical content and between that content and teaching practice.

One of the most difficult issues to address is the academic specialization which pervades higher education in the United States. Merely decreasing the size of a teacher education faculty is unlikely to overcome excessive specialization, a specialization which is sustained by the way doctoral education is configured, by the subject-centered basis of departmentalization, and by a faculty reward structure which is

attuned to topical inquiry. As a result, any attempt to create programmatic settings which encourage the broadening of teacher educators' content identities must also be accompanied by basic institutional reforms.

The effort to pursue these institutional reforms is a commendable enterprise. With greater respect for a generalist approach to teacher education, we may be able to realize the promise of smallness in teacher education. So let us reject the well-established ideas that bigger programs are better and that smaller programs are nothing more than boutique efforts. Small can be beautiful.

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